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Guatemala Logs Progress

Program Sustains Rain Forests, Boosts Villagers' Incomes

By BOB DAVIS
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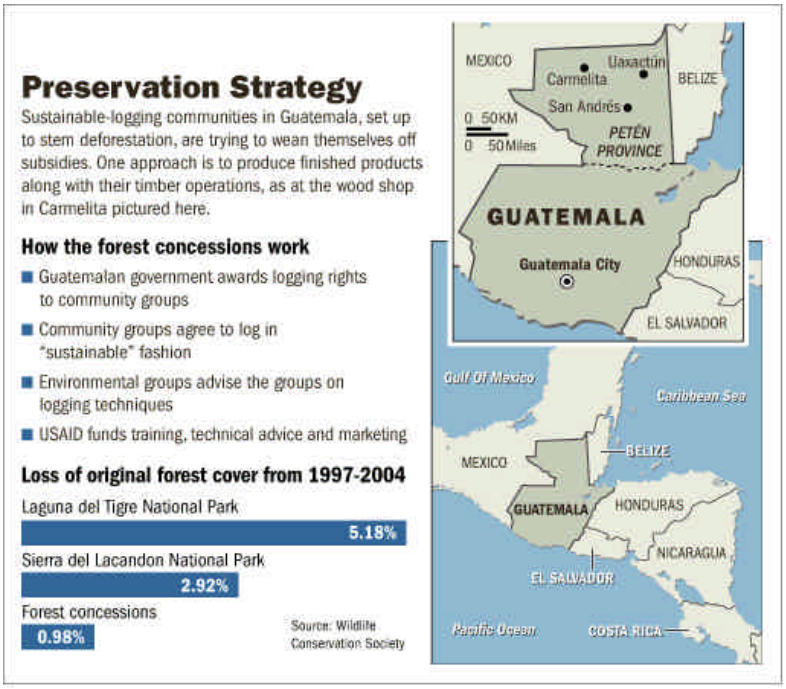
CARMELITA, Guatemala -- This remote jungle hamlet has started in the last few years to provide scholarships for local kids to go to junior high school in a town 40 miles away, where they live during the school year. The village also paid to improve the rutted dirt road that is its only link to the outside, and now is even thinking of buying a bus.

An unusual program that blends environmental protection and economic development is responsible for the gains. Essentially, the Guatemalan government gives 20 forest communities the right to log wide swaths of the rain forest, as long as they limit the harvest to a level at which the forest can regenerate itself. Workers get a boost in income by logging in what is deemed a sustainable fashion.

At a time of growing concern about deforestation and its effect on global climate change, the Guatemalan model is being hailed as a model for tropical-forest management. But its success has depended heavily on U.S. subsidies and advice, and training by international environmental groups, which are being scaled back. Now, the forest communities are being pushed to become more business savvy and to log more types of trees and plants, even though that could undermine efforts to preserve the forest. If the program can't exist without heavy subsidies, it won't catch on elsewhere in the developing world, where cash and expertise are in short supply.



"There's a Catch-22," says Roan Balas McNab, who advises another town with logging rights, Uaxactún, for the Wildlife Conservation Society, whose headquarters are at New York's Bronx Zoo. Although increased logging could boost living standards for local workers, facilitating access to these areas draws people who have an interest in clearing swaths of land by setting fires. "You have to make a decision: are you logging for ecological goals or for timber?"

The timber program dates to the end of Guatemala's 30-year civil war in 1996. The outlook was bleak for preserving the rain forest in the northern Petén region. Cattle ranchers and drug dealers both had an interest in burning down the forest and turning it into pasture land where cows could graze and cocaine-packed planes could land, an informal alliance dubbed "narco-ranching."

As an alternative, Guatemala divided about 1.2 million acres of forest land into 13 logging concessions, where the concession managers have the right to log timber as long as they do it in a sustainable manner. Two of the concessions went to logging companies. The other 11 were given to local communities, with a total of about 11,000 people, few of whom had much education or experience running a business -- let alone one that meets tough environmental standards.

Many of the residents scratched out a living tapping trees for the chicle used by the few chewing-gum makers that haven't turned to synthetic alternatives, or gathering plants to sell to florists. A nonprofit conservation group was assigned to advise each community concession; the **U.S. Agency for International Development** bankrolled the effort.

It was a novel experiment in giving local communities an economic incentive to become forest guardians. Mexico long has had cooperatively owned land, but the communities control much smaller parcels than in Guatemala and few commit to log in a sustainable way. **In Brazil, community groups have been awarded concessions, but usually to tap rubber trees or collect Brazil nuts, not to log.** Guatemala provided each concession with tens of thousands of acres each because valuable trees -- cedar and mahogany especially -- grow sparsely and take decades to regenerate. Communities needed vast acreages to turn a profit with low-intensity logging.

The concessions began in 1997, and some failed quickly. In one, community members divvied up the land among themselves, even though that was forbidden by Guatemalan law. In others, wealthy cattle ranchers grabbed land and the government didn't force them out.

But overall, the concessions can point to successes. Since 1997, the woods controlled by concessions have lost about 1% of their forest cover, about one-fifth the rate of deforestation of nearby Laguna del Tigre national park, according to surveys by the Wildlife Conservation Society. There are also fewer forest fires in the concessions than elsewhere in the Petén.

And while concession members remain poor, their incomes are inching up, as is their sense of what they can accomplish. Concessions pay about $10 a day to laborers, about twice the going

rate in the Petén for agricultural workers, and sometimes provide life insurance and loans. In Carmelita, the concession also bought a sawmill, so it can sell wood boards, not just raw timber, and has set up an experimental furniture-making facility.

"The next step is to add value," says Carlos Alberto Cersborn, the 23-year-old president of the concession, who serves a two-year term. "The co-op has to do integrated work, not just cut timber." The gains, though, have required heavy subsidies. Since 1997, **USAID** has spent about $8 million on the concessions, training the workers and helping them meet environmental standards. In some years, the U.S. subsidies have equaled about half of concessions' logging revenue. Currently, the concessions produce about $4 million of wood.

Now, the U.S. is trying to winnow its support and push the concessions to survive as businesses. One **USAID** contractor, Chemonics International Inc., a U.S. development consultant, has been surveying the region for 17 different species of trees, so the concessions don't rely on mahogany and cedar. Chemonics is urging the concessions to figure out ways to use discarded wood, and to learn to produce more-profitable finished products.

It's tough going. The concessions are used to outside help and are suspicious that profits from new ventures will wind up in others' pockets. A U.S. plan to have the concessions sell timber through a single jointly owned company to boost efficiency has met stiff resistance.

Conservation International, a large U.S. environmental group that helped set up forest concessions, now rejects the idea. Sustainable logging never works, says the group's chief economist, Richard Rice, because logging more intensively is more profitable. Now, he says, the U.S. "wants to save the rain forest by cutting down more trees. That won't work."

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